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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study that examined teenagers' modes of reasoning regarding the onset of sexual activity. Study participants, 200 California public high school students (96 males, 104 females, mean age 15.41 years), responded to questions about sexual values and decision-making. Students reported an average of 17.06 years as the age they believed it was all right for them to have sex; male students reported slightly earlier ages than female students. Participants could list few objective criteria for deciding when it would be right to have sex, and listed an average of less than one condition for having sex. Males required having opportunity or desire for sex (28 percent), being ready for sex (12 percent), being in love (10 percent), or being married (10 percent). Females required being married (23 percent), being ready for sex (16 percent), being in love (16 percent), or being responsible (13 percent). Males reported 12.48 sexual partners as acceptable prior to marriage; females reported 6.33 partners. Analysis of the data suggested that teens in general relied on a narrow set of emotional, subjective criteria for deciding when it was acceptable to become sexually active. Also, while students wanted to be sexually active for about 8 years before becoming pregnant, few teens listed preconditions to sexual activity that would ensure such an outcome. (ND)

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ED 403 262

HELPING TEENAGERS DEVELOP CRITERIA FOR DECIDING WHEN IT IS RIGHT TO HAVE SEX

Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the American School Health Association, St. Louis, MO, October 30 - November 2, 1996

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Research on adolescent thinking suggests disparities between adolescents' cognitive resources and their real life decision-making (Chi, Glaser, & Rees, 1982; Keating & Clark, 1980). The present study examined teenagers' modes of reasoning regarding the onset of sexual activity. In previous generations, the culturally accepted preconditions for sexual activity were much simpler: It wasn't "okay" to have sex until you were married. Today's adolescents, when deciding what makes it okay to have sex, have different cultural pressures and experiences. Close to half of American teenagers have experienced a divorce. Teens are exposed to a greater variety of social models than ever before, including widespread sexuality and childbearing outside of marriage. Moreover, from early childhood young people are bombarded with media representations of sexual activity rarely linked to any realistic consideration of its possible consequences. Similarly, many well-established sex differences are diminishing or reversing. Given these social conditions the present study examined teens' reasoning regarding the decision to become sexually active.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were two hundred teenagers (96 males, 104 females; mean age 15.41 years) attending four California public high schools serving heterogeneous,

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middle-class communities. Students participated voluntarily in the study as one of the learning activities in a Family Life Education instructional unit. Schools complied with state laws regarding informed consent for student participation in sex education instruction.

Data Collection and Analyses

Students responded privately and anonymously in writing during class to questions about sexual values and decision-making, including what age they believed it was OK for them to have sex, what preconditions were necessary for it to be acceptable for them to have sex, how many sexual partners were acceptable for themselves before marriage, and how many were acceptable for their future life partner. Frequencies were analyzed with descriptive statistics; comparative analyses were conducted with Oneway ANOVAs.

Results

Students reported an average of 17.06 years as the age they believed it was OK for them to have sex. Male students reported slightly earlier ages than female students (males: 16.39 years, females 17.58 years, $F=3.65$, $p=.06$). Teens expected to be sexually active for an average of eight years before they desired a pregnancy (males 9.55 years, females 6.94 years, $F=12.25$, $p<.001$).

Teens participating in the study could list few objective criteria for deciding when it would be right to have sex. In answer to the question "in your value system, what conditions are necessary for it to be acceptable for you to have sex," students listed an average of fewer than one condition (.71). Their responses to this question vary widely. Male students required having the opportunity or desire for sex (28% of males), being ready for sex (12%), in love (10%) or married (10%). Females required being married (23%), ready for sex (16%), in love (16%) or

responsible (13%). Less than five percent of teens' preconditions for heaving sex demonstrated consequence-based logical reasoning, such as protection from unplanned pregnancies or disease, school graduation, full time employment, or a stable relationship of a year or more.

In response to the question, "In your value system how many sexual partners is it OK for you to have before you enter a committed relationship with a life partner?," male teens reported 12.48 sexual partners acceptable for themselves prior to marriage, females reported 6.33 acceptable for themselves ($F=15.94$, $p<.0001$). Teens were also asked, "How many sexual partners is it OK for your life partner to have before entering a committed relationship with you?" In response to this question, male teens wanted their future mates to have not more than 5.25 sexual partners, while females wanted their future mates to have not more than 11.18 sexual partners ($F=10.14$, $p<.01$).

Discussion

Although the potential for logical reasoning is a hallmark of adolescent cognitive development, this capacity was not exercised in teens' sexual decision-making in the present study. Apparently, teens have given little thought to the reality-based conditions necessary to make it appropriate for them to have sex. In general, teens relied on a narrow set of emotional, subjective criteria for deciding when it was acceptable to become sexually active. If teenagers do not generate (or thoughtfully evaluate) consequence-based criteria for deciding when it is right to have sex in a paper-pencil context, it is unlikely they are prepared to make this life-forming decision in real-life pressure situations. Another indication of the wide gap between reality and teens' decision-making is the data indicating students wanted to be sexually active for about eight years before becoming pregnancy. However, few teens listed preconditions to sexual activity that would ensure such

an outcome. Finally, we found the sexual double standard with regard to number of acceptable sexual partners firmly embraced by both male and female teens.

Taken together, these results indicate specific strategies to engage teens' practical intelligence regarding sexual activity. We might for example:

- challenge young people to question sex-role stereotypes and relentless media representations of couples impulsively having sex based on emotional criteria, e.g., *"it feels so right it can't be wrong"*;
- challenge teens to examine the criteria they use for deciding to whether or not to become sexually active in terms of subjectivity vs. objectivity, feelings vs. facts, now vs. future, goals and consequences;
- encourage teens to add consequence- and goal-based criteria into sexual decision-making, in addition to emotional criteria;
- validate teenagers who chose to define for themselves a period of abstinence in their lives that is based on logical reasoning as well as their own goals and concerns.

References

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Table 1

The Percentage of Teens Citing Subjective-Emotional Versus Objective-Logical Criteria for Deciding When it is Right to Have Sex

Subjective-Emotional Criteria	Males	Females	Objective-Logical Criteria	Males	Females
I have the opportunity or desire for sex	28%	0%	I am married to my partner	10%	23%
I am ready for sex	12%	16%	I am using protection from disease and unplanned pregnancy	2%	3%
I am in love	10%	16%	I am graduated from high school or college	0%	0%
I am responsible	0%	13%	I have a stable, full-time job	0%	0%
			I have been in a stable relationship with my partner for a year or more	0%	0%